OUT OF OUR HEADS

Philip Shepherd On The Brain In Our Belly

AMNON BUCHBINDER

I MET PHILIP SHEPHERD *when I cast him in a film I was directing. He was amused to learn that I had written a book called* The Way of the Screenwriter. *He was just finishing a book he'd been working on for eight years, originally titled* The Way of the Actor. *But, he explained, it had become about much more than acting. I asked what it was now about.*

"Everything," he said.

Good luck getting that published, *I thought.*

But it did get published three years later, in the fall of 2010, as New Self, New World: Recovering Our Senses in the Twenty-First Century. *I bought a copy more out of loyalty than appetite. I've read plenty of books about "everything." Each of them diagnoses the ailment of living and proposes a single cure. I had become skeptical of such unified-field theories, which seem to constitute a retreat from the world's problems under the guise of trying to solve them. It wasn't until more than a year later, when illness suddenly gave me ample reading time, that I took Shepherd's book off the shelf and began to turn the pages.*

New Self, New World *explores the implications of the little-known fact that we have two brains: in addition to the familiar cranial brain in the head, there is a "second brain" in the gut. This is not a metaphor. Scientists recognize the web of neurons lining the gastrointestinal tract as an independent brain, and a new field of medicine — neurogastroenterology — has been created to study it.*

According to Shepherd, there is a good reason that we talk about "gut instinct." If cranial thinking sets us apart from the world, the thinking in the belly joins us to it. If the cranial brain believes itself surrounded by a knowable world that can be controlled, the brain in our belly is in touch with the world's mystery. The fact that the second brain has been discovered, forgotten, and rediscovered by medicine three times in the past century suggests how complicated our relationship with our bodily intelligence is.

Although Shepherd feels that his claims are consistent with scientific findings, his primary concerns are cultural and philosophical, and his primary frame is not medical but mythic. Weaving threads from disciplines that are normally treated as

separate, his book treats art, religion, and science as facets of a single story. Whether giving a deep reading to an academic article on the implications of brain transplants or parsing the work of the early Greek philosophers, Shepherd reminds us that all human endeavors are modes of encounter with the world, rooted in one or both of our brains. He argues that we, as a culture and as individuals, have become walled off in our heads, losing touch with the intelligence of our bodies. We have reached a point, Shepherd tells us, where the cranial brain's efforts to solve our problems are *the problem. Only by leaving the "tyrant's castle" of our heads and entering into a profoundly embodied relationship with the mystery and beauty of the world will we successfully turn our planetary crisis into an "initiation."*

PHILIP SHEPHERD

The insights Shepherd shares in his book emerged from his own life. Born in 1953, he grew up in a suburb of Toronto, Canada, on the fringe of wilderness and farmers' fields — and then watched as nature was flattened and paved to make room for more houses. A spring-fed creek nearby was turned into an underground storm sewer. These transformations left him wary of the adult world. When he turned eighteen, he left for England to undertake a solo bike trip across Europe and Asia, eventually to arrive in Japan to study classical Noh theater. Since then he has worked as an actor on stage and in film and television, and also as a director, writer, editor, and communication coach. He's occasionally made a living using his skills as a carpenter, electrician, and plumber, and he has designed and built several houses, including his own.

After I'd finished reading New Self, New World *during the chill of a Toronto winter, I took one of Shepherd's weekend workshops. With patience and persistence, he guided about fifteen of us through a series of exercises designed to bring our awareness into our bodies and to connect our heads to our "pelvic" intelligence. The outwardly simple yet inwardly challenging exercises took us on a journey deep into the unfamiliar roots of our own sensitivity.*

Shepherd lives with his wife and two teenage daughters in a small, car-free community on Ward's Island in Lake Ontario, a ten-minute ferry ride from downtown Toronto. Our interview took place at my home just outside the city in the other direction. It's about forty-five minutes from the ferry on a highway by car, but Shepherd arrived on his bike. We sat to talk by a summer pond full of life.

Buchbinder: You've said that we have a misguided cultural story about what it means to be human. What does that story tell us?

Shepherd: It tells us that the head should be in charge, because it knows the answers, and the body is little more than a vehicle for transporting the head to its next engagement. It tells us that *doing* is the primary value, while *being* is secondary. It shapes our perceptions, actions, and experiences of life. It separates us from the sensations of the body and alienates us from the world. And there is no escaping this story; it's embedded in our language, our architecture, our customs, and our hierarchies. It's like the ocean, and we are like fish who swim in it and barely notice it because we've lived with it since infancy.

By interpreting reality for us, stories frame and give meaning to our actions. But there's a danger to living by a story that you can't question, because you start to mistake the story for reality. And that's where my work starts — in formulating questions that can expose that story and hold it to account.

Buchbinder: Where did this story come from?

Shepherd: It dates back to the Neolithic Revolution, which was underway in most of Europe by 6,000 BC and gave us a new way of living: agriculture, permanent settlements, domesticated animals. We started taking charge of our environment. When you domesticate an animal, you become like a god to it. You determine with whom it will mate, and you own its babies. You choose what it will eat and when. And you determine the moment of its death.

So at the start of the Neolithic Era humankind was radically altering its relationship with the world. The unforeseen consequence of that, which our culture hasn't yet begun to appreciate, is that we also began to take control of the self in ways that created within us the same divisions we were creating in our relationship with the world. If you go back to the Indo-European roots of the English language, which date from the Neolithic, you find that the word for the hub of a wheel came from the word for navel. The hub is the center around which the wheel revolves. The metaphor suggests that the center of the self was located in the belly.

The idea of being centered in the belly shows up in many cultures — Incan, Maya. There is a Chinese word for belly that means "mind palace." Japanese culture rests on a foundation of *hara*, which means "belly" and represents the seat of understanding. The Japanese have a host of expressions that use *hara* where we use *head*. We say, "He's hotheaded." They say, "His belly rises easily." We say, "He has a good head on his shoulders." They say, "He has a well-developed belly."

Buchbinder: This isn't just a semantic issue, is it?

Shepherd: No, it's deeper. These cultural differences point out that we have lost some choice in how we experience ourselves. Our culture doesn't recognize that hub in the belly, and most of us don't trust it enough to come to rest there. Our story insists that our thinking happens exclusively in the head. And so we are stuck in the cranium, unable to open the door to the body and join *its* thinking. The best we can do is put our ear to the imaginary wall separating us from it and "listen to the body," a phrase that means well but actually keeps us in the head, gathering information from the outside. But the body is not outside. The body is you. We are missing the experience of our own being.

PHOTO: JULIA PEPLER

To get a sense of what we have lost, it helps to appreciate the forces that carried us into the head. The Neolithic Revolution spawned two major changes in our story: the experiential center of the self, which had been located in the belly, began to migrate upward to the head; and the spiritual center of our culture began to migrate from the earth goddess up to the sky god. In mythological ways of thinking, the body and the world of nature generally are associated with the feminine, while the head and the realm of abstract ideas are associated with the masculine.

By around 700 BC, we find the Greek poet Homer making frequent use of the word *phren*, which translates as both "mind" and "diaphragm." So by Homer's day the migration of our thinking was about halfway to the head, balanced between male and female. Some rich developments came out of that ancient Greek culture: the birth of Western science, philosophy, literature, theater. But by 350 BC or so the philosopher Plato locates the center of our thinking in the head. In his dialogue *Timaeus* the title character explains that the gods made us by fashioning the soul into a divine sphere, the cranium, and then gave it a vehicle, the body, to carry it around. So the head has the spark of divinity, and the body is a machine. That's been our metaphor ever since.

Our culture has been intolerant of attempts to reclaim this lost center of consciousness. In the early 1900s a Chicago anatomist named Byron Robinson wrote a book called *The Abdominal and Pelvic Brain* in which he describes the neurology of an independent brain in the gut. His work was quickly forgotten — it had no relevance to our cultural story. Then, in the late 1920s, Johannis Langley mapped out the autonomic nervous system. He said there were three divisions: the sympathetic, the parasympathetic, and the enteric. The enteric nervous system, which governs the gastrointestinal functions, is exactly what Robinson called the "abdominal brain." Langley's book became a classic, but the enteric nervous system was widely ignored, and students were taught that the autonomic nervous system has just two divisions.

Finally, in the 1960s, Dr. Michael Gershon rediscovered the brain in the gut. In his book *The Second Brain* he describes how it took him fifteen years of presenting his research and answering refutations before his fellow neuroscientists capitulated and agreed that the neuromass in the belly is indeed an independent brain. [*Gershon is a professor of pathology and cell biology at Columbia University. — Ed.*]

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Robinson, who first discovered the pelvic brain, was much freer in his assessment of its importance than scientists are today. He talked about it as the "center of life." I completely agree with that. It is the center of one's being.

Buchbinder: How does it meet the criteria for being a brain?

Shepherd: We shouldn't imagine it as a lump of gray matter. The enteric brain is a web of neurons lining the gut. But it perceives, thinks, learns, decides, acts, and remembers all on its own. You can sever the vagus nerve, which is the main conduit between the two brains, and the brain in the gut just carries on doing its job.

So they are both brains, but they are radically different. The enteric brain exists as a network that suffuses the viscera as a whole — which mirrors the way the female aspect of our consciousness feels the world around us as a whole, enabling us to exist in the present. The cranial brain, by contrast, is enclosed in the skull. And that mirrors the way the male aspect of our consciousness can separate itself from the world and create a subject-object relationship, enabling us to think abstractly. These two ways of engaging our intelligence reveal two different versions of the same world.

Buchbinder: Why bring "male" and "female" into it? Why associate "doing" with the male and "being" with the female?

Shepherd: The terms are imperfect, certainly, because people will tend to hear "men" and "women" — but I'm not talking about men and women. I'm talking about the complementary opposites that exist in each of us. Whether you are a man or a woman, there is both a masculine aspect to your consciousness and a feminine aspect. To come into wholeness is to realize the indivisible unity of these parts. At this point in our culture the male aspect has eclipsed the female aspect. I see this in both men and women. We have been taught to mistrust our bodies, to mistrust our intuition, to mistrust any information that is not analytical.

This head-based, masculine perspective gives rise to three serious misunderstandings that drive our culture: we misunderstand what intelligence is, what information is, and what thinking is. Take our understanding of intelligence. We think it's the ability to reason in an abstract fashion, something you can measure with an IQ test. So we remain blind to the impotence of reason in areas of vital concern to us. You cannot reason your way into being present. You cannot reason your way into love. You cannot reason your way into fulfillment. If you wish to be present, you need to submit to the present, and suddenly you find yourself at one with it. You submit to love.

There's that great quote from the Persian mystic Rumi: "Your task is not to seek love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it."

Buchbinder: If intelligence isn't abstract reasoning, what is it?

Shepherd: It's sensitivity — specifically a grounded sensitivity, because a reactive sensitivity isn't able to integrate information. A sensitivity to music, to the flight of a swallow, to arithmetic relationship, to a child's tears — all of these are forms of intelligence. And your sensitivity isn't a static, permanent condition. Anything that increases it increases your ability to live more intelligently. Conversely, the constant noise and distractions of modern life have the opposite effect. The jackhammer you walk past on the street diminishes your intelligence by blunting your sensitivity.

You cannot reason your way into being present. You cannot reason your way into love. You cannot reason your way into fulfillment.

Buchbinder: If this focus on the head began in the Neolithic, are you saying that we need to go back to the Mesolithic? What if the rise of consciousness to the cranial brain was an important part of our development as humans?

Shepherd: Our task at this point isn't to go back. It's not a matter of giving up the ability to think consciously or abstractly; it's a matter of coordinating the two brains. Picture the first astronaut who went into orbit and took a photo of our planet. He brought that unprecedented perspective back home and showed it to people. Suddenly they were newly sensitized to what it means to be a citizen of the planet. They became slightly more intelligent about their relationship with it. I think that new sensitivity contributed to the range of environmental initiatives, such as the Earth Day movement and Friends of the Earth, that sprang forth in the years following that first photo of the earth from space.

That story of the astronaut stands as a metaphor for the evolution of our consciousness, but we are only halfway through the journey. We have left our home in the belly and are now "in orbit" in the head, viewing the world from a new, somewhat remote vantage point. Just as the astronaut gains perspective by separating from the earth, we gain perspective by stepping back from the body, separating our consciousness from its sensations and dulling our awareness of them.

The problem is, we don't know how to bring those perspectives back home so they can be integrated. Without that integration our abstract perspectives can't sensitize us to the world. They merely abet our ability to assert control over it. Our culture has a tacit assumption that if we can just gather enough information on ourselves and our world, it will add up to a whole. But when you stand back to look at something, there are always details that are hidden from you. The integration of multiple perspectives into a whole can happen only when, like the astronaut bringing the photo back to earth, we bring this information back to our pelvic bowl, back to the ground of our being, back to the integrating genius of the female consciousness. The pelvic bowl is the original beggar's bowl: it receives the gifts of the world — of the male perspective — and it integrates them. As you bring ideas down to the belly and let them settle there, they sensitize you to who you are and eventually give birth to insight. Our task is to learn to trust that process.

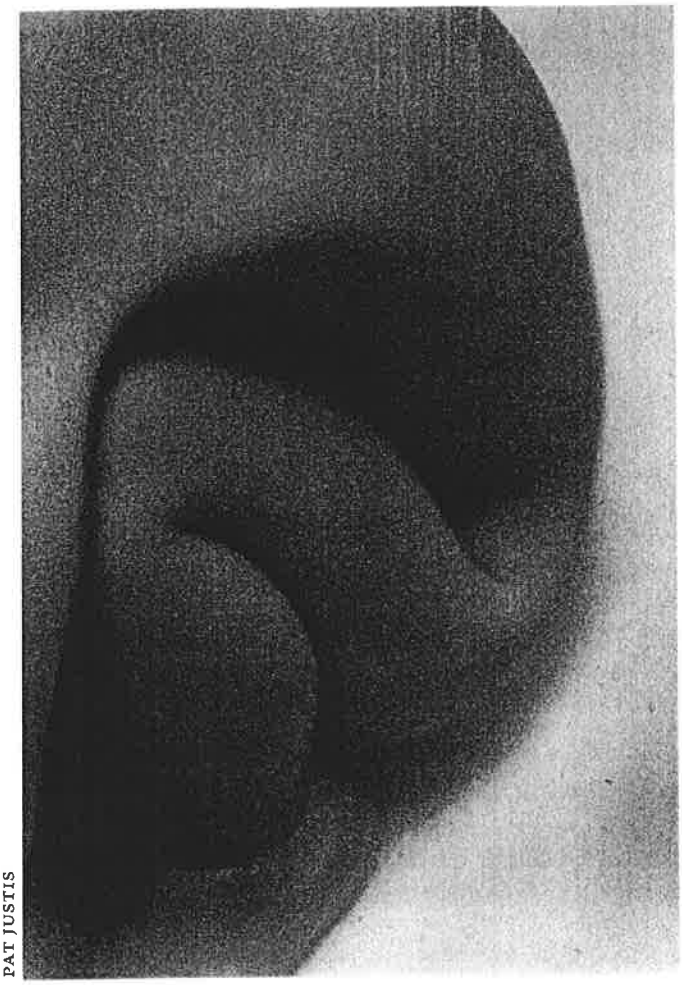
The central theme of my work is that our relationship with the body shapes our perceptions, which in turn direct the actions we take and guide the theories we generate. The atomic theory began as a philosophical concept that was first expounded by Democritus around the same time Plato declared the head to be the soul's container and the body its vehicle. Having individuated ourselves from the world, we saw a reality made of individuated bits, a shattered universe of random pieces that have no real relationship with each other. And we still see it that way, because we live in the head. But that's an alienating impoverishment of reality. Quantum mechanics has revealed that not even an electron exists as an individuated bit. It exists as part of a web of relationships.

Our relationship with the body has similarly affected our politics, our corporate culture, our language, our cultural values — all of human history. Language tells us explicitly that the head should rule. You'd better have a good *head* on your shoulders. You need to get a*head*. The bosses work in corporate *head*quarters and *head* up committees. *Chief*, *captain*, and *capital* all come from the Latin word for head, so Washington, DC, is literally the "head" of the U.S. We call the pope the "head" of the Roman Catholic Church. We could call him the "heart" of the Church, to emphasize that it's an institution based on faith. Or we could call him the "lungs" of the Church, because *spirit* means "breath." The Church might look to its original model, Jesus, who did not live from the head. Instead it's organized as a top-down tyranny, with the pope as its "head."

Buchbinder: You've talked about our task of integration in terms of what mythologist Joseph Campbell called the "hero's journey."

Shepherd: Campbell showed us that almost all cultures have a myth of the hero who journeys into an unfamiliar realm to secure a boon or elixir — a new perspective, as I see it — that, when brought home, will re-energize the hero's society. Now, this myth is telling us about different parts of ourselves. The male aspect of our consciousness has the tendencies of both hero and tyrant. What sends it one way or the other is its relationship to the female aspect of consciousness, which puts us in touch with being. The hero, as Campbell puts it, is the "man of self-achieved submission" — a submission to "what is." When you submit to being, you attune to what the world asks of you: the hero's "call to action." But Campbell characterized the tyrant as the "man of self-achieved independence" — and that independence is a separation from being, a refusal of the call.

Buchbinder: And the call is to acquire the elixir of life and bring it back.



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Shepherd: Right. But our culture is so fixated on its search for new perspectives on existence -- on seeing its parts and analyzing them — that we are like an astronaut stuck in orbit. We are alienated from being and cannot find our way home. And that manifests itself on an individual level. Stuck in our heads, we go round and round, trying and failing to control things. It's a form of self-tyranny. We need to come home to our bodies, come to rest in the core of our being, and sensitize ourselves once more to "what is."

Buchbinder: In the book you compare the effect of our culture's story to those glass wasp traps: easy to get into but not so easy to escape. You were born into this cultural trap, the same as the rest of us. How did you escape?

Shepherd: It began when I was a teenager. In high school I could feel my thinking being funneled into well-worn ruts: the givens of our culture, the story that it tells about what's right and wrong, up and down. The adults around me seemed to be living in a disconnected fantasy world they had created, and they were waiting for me to join them there. Something in me raged against this — but I knew that, as long as I remained in my native culture, I would succumb to it. So at the age of eighteen I went to England and bought a bicycle, and I set off to ride to Japan. I cycled through Europe, the Middle East, Iran, and India, and along the way I encountered many different ways of understanding what it means to be human — each valid, each luminous. The only time I suffered culture shock was when I came back home. I'd been away two years, and when I returned, the familiar was rendered bizarre. I came back with the ability to raise questions that I had been incapable of asking as long as I remained bound to my culture.

Buchbinder: What called you to Japan in particular?

Shepherd: It was an experience of classical Noh theater. I saw a production at the age of seventeen and was both moved to tears and utterly bewildered by it. I already loved theater and had seen John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson onstage: the finest actors that Western theater had to offer. And now here was this foreign theatrical tradition that had worked its subtle magic on me, and I had no way of parsing it. I stood at a fork in the road, because I had been accepted to study physics at the University of Toronto, but I was more profoundly baffled by Noh theater than by science; its mysteries mattered more to me.

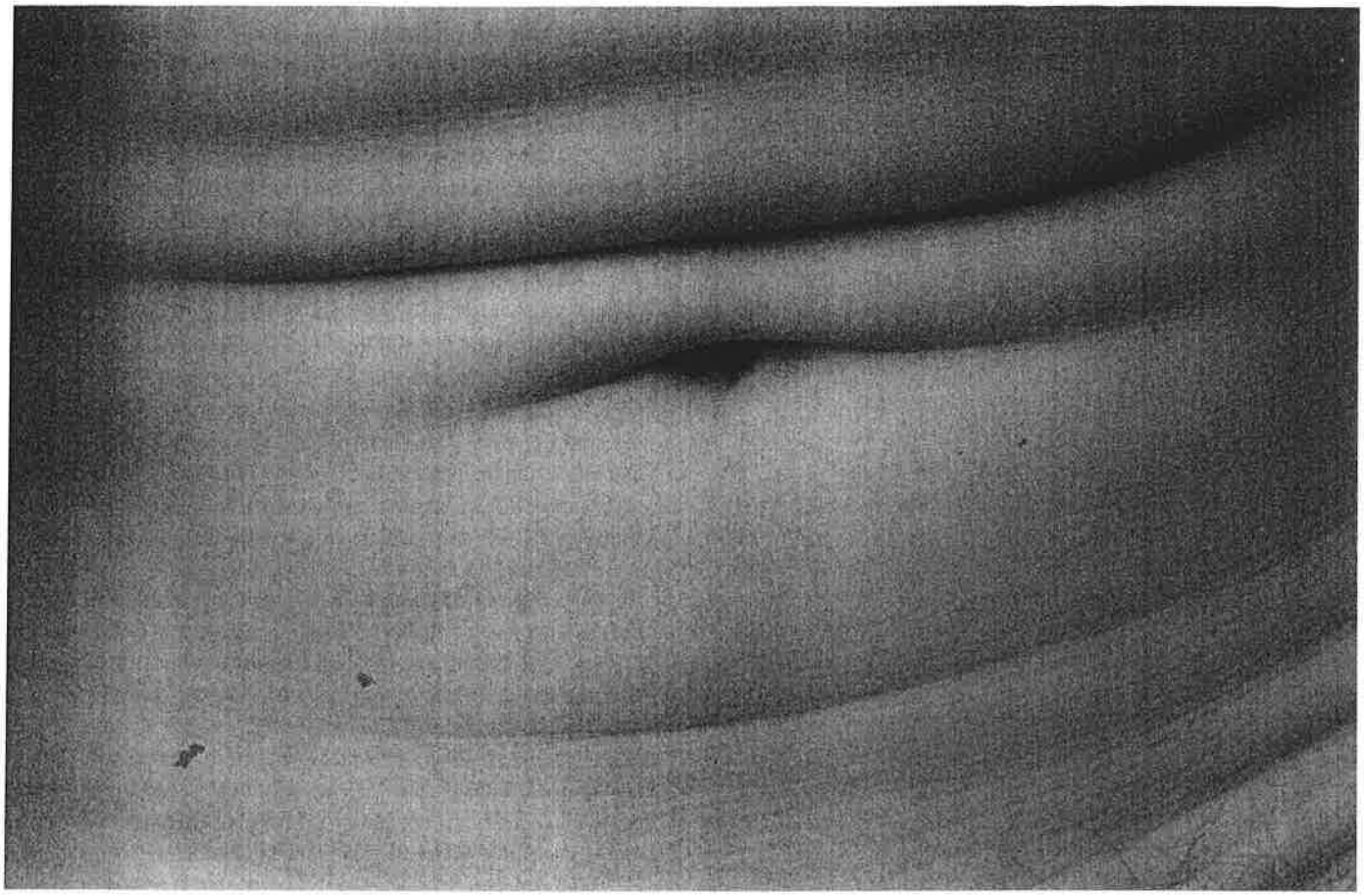
In Japan I learned the concept of *hara*, of living through the belly. Slowly I discovered what it meant to be in that place in the body from which the Noh actors were moving and seeing and thinking and listening. I learned what it meant to be there as an actor, allowing your performance to arise from its holistic intelligence. My book was originally called *The Way of the Actor* because I had started teaching workshops to introduce actors to this other way of being. The main challenge an actor faces is simply how to be present onstage. All acting exercises and lessons are just variations on that theme.

So I was teaching these workshops for actors, but people began coming who had no interest in acting: philosophy students, poets, graphic designers. At a certain point I realized that the issues I was delving into might be of interest to a wider audience.

Buchbinder: In a way it all boils down to how much sensitivity one can bring to bear on the world wherever one happens to be. You and I are having this conversation outside. There's a pond, birds, currents of air. Once you pay attention, you realize how much is going on.

Shepherd: As I said earlier, our culture misunderstands what information is. We are addicted to "digital" information. I don't mean literally information that comes to us through digital sources, but rather information that, like a digital signal, is made up of bits and pieces broken off from the whole. We think that's real information. But there is also "analog" information. Analog information comes to us in a wave. When you play an old LP record, the needle tracks through the groove, and the waves in the groove — which were shaped by the original sound waves — re-create the music. The form of the wave never changes. Digitally stored music has to be reduced to bits of information that are then interpreted by a computer, which creates sound based on them. But a wave carries more information than even an endless number of bits. Waves from outer space can still tell us about the big bang.

Indigenous Polynesian sailors use information from ocean waves to navigate their way across the Pacific and find an island up to five hundred miles away — an unimaginable feat to the colonial Europeans who first encountered them and still



WILLIAM CARTER

sometimes got lost even with sextants and compasses. This native navigational tradition was suppressed and prohibited by the Europeans, but it has survived. Navigators are chosen in infancy and are placed in tidal pools for hours, feeling the water's rhythms and currents. When they're fully trained adults, they can sit on the ocean in a canoe and feel multiple swells moving beneath the hull. These deep swells are refraction patterns from islands far beyond the horizon, and they guide the navigators across the trackless ocean.

In the same way that the Polynesian sailors are attuned to the energy of the ocean, we need to attune ourselves to the energy of the world. The world is not separate from the self. We are so intimately bound to it that when I raise my hand, the world feels it. When I allow the breath to drop into my body, the world feels it. The world feels my beating heart.

Buchbinder: Do you mean that metaphorically?

Shepherd: No, it's simply the reality of how interrelated everything is. In his book *Chance and Chaos*, theoretical physicist David Ruelle asks the reader to imagine that, standing on the earth, you can wave a magic wand and eliminate the gravitational field of a single electron at the farthest edge of the universe. And as you do that, you begin tracking a molecule of oxygen in the air beside you. That molecule will go through about fifty collisions that it would have gone through even if you hadn't waved the wand. Then suddenly it will miss a molecule that it otherwise would have hit. All of this takes less than a second. Thereafter, every molecular collision in the room will be different. And the next day the clouds will be different, and the gusts of wind will be different — all because the gravitational field of a single electron at the remotest fringe of the universe has been eliminated.

Quantum mechanics tells us that information cannot be destroyed. It lives on through everything it has affected. Eastern philosophy has known for centuries that there is no existence except through relationship. We diminish our sense of being — our sense of our own reality — as we systematically disconnect from body and world.

All our modern scientific endeavors have been aimed at knowing the universe in part, because it's "unscientific" to feel the whole. Scientists have been striving to find the smallest unit of existence — from the atom to the quark to the string — when in fact the smallest unit of existence is the cosmos itself. It is an indivisible whole. Nothing exists independent of it or can be divided from it.

Buchbinder: That would include us. So are you saying that our sensitivity is potentially infinite?

Shepherd: I've witnessed sensitivity in others that is breathtaking in its reach and accuracy. The precondition to sensitivity is stillness. In the same way that a pond on a still day will visibly register the smallest insect alighting on its surface, but on a windy day it won't, our ability to feel the whole is directly proportional to our ability to become still within ourselves.

Buchbinder: Perhaps that's why people have their best ideas while relaxing.

Shepherd: Yes, in England they talk about the "three Bs," where the greatest scientific discoveries are made: the bed, the bath, and the bus. Again, you cannot reason your way into stillness. You cannot just decide to be still. Our bodies typically carry so much habitual and residual tension within them that our intelligence is confused by all that white noise. The tension is a result of emotions and ideas that haven't been integrated. You get a certain abstract idea that seems right to you, but if you hold on to it too tightly, it will stand between you and your responsiveness to the world, disrupting the information coming to you through the body. It's the same with emotions. To survive, we sometimes put our emotions on hold for decades before we're strong enough to integrate them. But they remain in the body, preventing stillness.

Consumerism comes out of a craving, at the root of which is our dissociation from being. There's a restless emptiness at our core, an emptiness that has obliterated our sense of "enough."

Buchbinder: So to find that stillness, we have to remove the obstacles to it, just as Rumi writes of removing the obstacles to love.

Shepherd: Yes, and most people have no idea how many obstacles they harbor in their body.

Buchbinder: When I took your workshop, you gave us an exercise in which one person was to allow another to gently move his or her head around. The fellow whose head I was moving couldn't have been older than twenty, yet his head was almost immobile. He was unable to release it for me to move, in spite of his best efforts.

We're like the opposite of the Polynesian child in the tidal pool: we've been placed from infancy in something that prevents us from developing awareness.

Shepherd: In mythic terms we are the tyrant who won't become the hero. We receive the hero's call but refuse it, because we believe ourselves safe and secure. The head has become our fortified abode, and we hunker in there in the belief that our thinking will save us. But if science, for example, does on occasion seem to save the day, that just reinforces our illusion that we are separate from nature and have only to investigate and intervene in its workings in the right way, and all will be well. So the effect of relying exclusively on science is to more deeply validate our tyrannical tendencies.

Myth warns us that when we indulge our tyrannical tendencies, we inherit the tyrant's lot in life. We have no security of being, and so we live with the tyrant's anxieties. We try to fill the emptiness of our being, and so we suffer the tyrant's greed and restlessness. We divorce our doing from our being, and so we suffer the tyrant's loss of grace. In identifying so closely with the tyrant, we have even come to share the tyrannical ideal of freedom, which is the ability to disconnect. The multibillionaire can disconnect from those less fortunate by living in a penthouse suite or a mansion surrounded by acres of groomed grass and an electric fence. He can disconnect from the processes of his own life by hiring someone to cook his food or drive him places. He can disconnect from everything ordinary. But the ordinary teapot, the ordinary roadside flower — these join us to the moment and to history and to life.

Thanks to our disconnection, we have also inherited the tyrant's rampant fantasies. Experiments with isolation chambers have shown that extreme disconnection leads to hallucinations. And that, on a large scale, is what's happened to our culture. We've gone mad. I can't believe politicians are still talking about the necessity of economic growth — as though the planet were going to grow along with us. The planet cannot grow any more, and we are already crushing it with the weight of our human needs. Our current crises are a product of our hallucinations, which arise directly from our broken relationship with the body.

What is asked of the hero at this point in the myth is to surrender: not to assert yet more control, but to come into harmony with the whole. Where there is no harmony, there will be stress and strife and tension. The tragedy of our culture is that we misunderstand harmony to mean order, because when you're living in your head, order is all you can perceive. And the more you order things and systematize things and get them "right," the safer you feel. But harmony is the opposite of control: it's an organic whole in which every part answers to every other part. That also describes the reality of the universe.

Buchbinder: So when we're confronted with tyranny, the solution you're prescribing is "self-achieved submission." But how do you deal with tyranny as a social reality? Surely the answer is not to give in to tyrants and let them have their way.

Shepherd: You're not surrendering to a political tyrant. *You* are the tyrant who must descend from your fortified abode, reunite with the body's grounded sensitivity, and become aware of the world as it is, as opposed to your concept of it. The more sensitive you are to the world around you, the more responsive you are. That ability to respond is the basis of *responsibility.* And the actions it prompts will be a grounded means of addressing a human necessity, not a reflexive action goaded onward by an idea.

Ideas are seductive in their certainty and simplicity, but because any idea is a static construct, it stands independent of the present. To give your allegiance to an idea is to turn away from the connected intelligence of your being. I think the most dangerous people in the world are those who feel their *ideas* about the world more keenly than they feel the world itself, because they will be disconnected from what is in front of them and can act only out of their fantasy. Holding fast to an idea, because it's frozen, also promises to excuse you from having to change. But harmony requires us to change along with the whole. If you open yourself to the hum of the

world — if you live in the present rather than in your idea of it — it will change you.

Buchbinder: When I took your workshop, I found it interesting that, although many of the participants were teachers of practices like yoga or Pilates, they didn't necessarily have an easier time doing your exercises than I did.

Shepherd: A lot of those wonderful body-work practices still emphasize how important it is to "listen" to the body. My work is not about "listening to the body." It's about listening to the world *through the body.* Once you come to rest in the body, you come to rest in the wholeness that is the trembling world itself. It's as the Greek philosopher Plotinus said: "All the world breathes together." In our "doing" society, we have a zeal for sorting out our agenda and implementing it. But in my experience the world is there to guide you at every moment. The world is calling you to come play, to come risk, to let your heart burn with a passion that will make sense of your life. The world will speak to you as intimately as your mother did when you were a child, if you can allow the body to teach you its different way of listening. There's a story about George Washington Carver, the brilliant African American botanist. Someone asked him, "How is it that you understand these plants so well?" and he replied, "If you love it enough, anything will talk to you."

Buchbinder: If you ask indigenous peoples where they got their knowledge of plants, they typically say that the information came from the plants themselves.

Shepherd: Yes, this idea that early humans went through the woods and sampled plants to see if they were poison or medicine is bizarre. Again, we think information is digital, that each plant must be examined in isolation and tested. But the truest information is analog. We just have to develop our sensitivity to it — to seek and find all the barriers within ourselves that we have built against it.

The Greek philosopher Parmenides laid down the modus operandi of Western thought when he said, in effect: Don't trust the senses. The senses will deceive you. Only reason can lead you to the truth. He went on to reason that nothing could move, despite the fact that our senses tell us the world is constantly in motion. So reason can mislead us every bit as much as the senses can.

Our elevation of reason over the real, material world we can touch and taste and feel is part of our demeaning of the feminine. The word *material* is related to *maternal.* There's this urge to leave the material world of sensation and ascend toward the sky, the heady upper realms, where we find the abstract, perfect forms generated by the cranial brain.

Buchbinder: But is materialism any better? Isn't our consumer society some sort of consolation prize for being separated from the body?

Shepherd: Modern materialism doesn't honor the material world — it demeans it. We're buying things we'll throw in the garbage in two years. My mother's washing machine worked for forty-five years. Mine was broken beyond repair after eight. The more avidly we consume, the more we turn material objects into worthless waste. Consumerism comes out of a craving, at the root of which is our dissociation from being. There's a restless emptiness at our core, an emptiness that has obliterated our sense of "enough." Our relationship with our body is broken, but it is always the last thing we think about. We try to fix our lives or the world.

Buchbinder: What about the heart? If the cranial brain is taking care of abstract thought, and the pelvic brain is taking care of our connection to being, what role does the heart play?

Shepherd: The heart is where the two poles of our consciousness meet; it's the point of balance between the two. In our culture we hear that it's important to open the heart and live from the heart — which is true — but unless the heart is rooted in the ground of your being, it's not going to be supported. It's like a cut flower as opposed to one that's growing in the earth. So the emphasis on the heart puts the cart before the horse.

Buchbinder: You mentioned that Japan and China traditionally recognize the belly as a center of intelligence. Does that make their cultures more evolved than ours?

Shepherd: Well, they are no less tyrannical or patriarchal than ours — and are more so in some ways. In my limited experience, people in those cultures live in either the head or the belly. They haven't integrated the two poles of consciousness. In certain fields they are deeply skilled at attuning to analog information, but putting the head in charge seems to be their default mode. If we're going to continue to evolve as a species, we need to experience our intelligence not as a unipolar phenomenon — all head or all belly — but as an axis. In the same way that a bar magnet has an axis with positive and negative poles that sustain the field around it, our integrated intelligence is an axis through which all these exchanges between the cranial brain and the pelvic brain occur, and its field is our sensitivity.

Buchbinder: When you teach all of this in a workshop, how do you reply to somebody who says, "That sounds great, but I have to go to work on Monday in the world of ideas and 'doing.'"

Shepherd: You can go into your job and remain in touch with your breath. Allow it to drop to your pelvic floor. Remain in touch with that still point at the core of your being. You don't have to quit your job to do this.

Of course, if you do bring your breath down to the pelvic floor, you might realize that you *need* to quit your job.

Buchbinder: So you can acknowledge the pelvic brain even though you still may be working with ideas.

Shepherd: Yes. Obviously I love ideas. I wrote a book that's full of them. But my ideas are first and foremost accountable to my experience. A problem arises when your ideas distract you from your experience.

Buchbinder: That's the tyranny of ideas.

Shepherd: Yes. The way to escape it is the process of self-achieved submission that Campbell describes. It's called a "heroic" surrender for a reason, because it takes courage. It also takes faith. You're sacrificing the illusion of control. But it's the only means by which you can come home to your self and truly feel in unity with all that is around you. ■